

RELEASED IN PART B1,1.4(D)

ACTION EUR-00

INFO LOG-00 NP-00 AID-00 CIAE-00 INL-00 DNI-00 DODE-00
 DOEE-00 DOTE-00 PERC-00 DS-00 EAP-00 EB-00 OIGO-00
 FAAE-00 FBIE-00 VC-00 H-00 TEDE-00 INR-00 LAB-01
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 NSAE-00 NSCE-00 OES-00 OMB-00 NIMA-00 PA-00 PM-00
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C O N F I D E N T I A L MINSK 000590

KIEV FOR USAID

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/26/15
 TAGS: PGOV, PREL, PINR, BO
 SUBJECT: Zubr, Belarusian Bison or Just a Big Cow?

Ref: 04 Minsk 1738

Classified by Charge Constance Phlipot for Reasons 1.4
 (B,D)

1. (C) Summary: The Zubr youth group was an active force for the opposition during the 2001 presidential elections. What they are today is harder to judge. Zubr's leadership consistently exaggerates the group's presence and role, while its detractors (many of who are former members) claim it is a shadow of its former self. In the past year Zubr has had a modest presence at several street protests, where a number of members were arrested. Many other members have been arrested passing out leaflets or the group's monthly newssheet, or for displaying the banned nationalist flag. Zubr's leadership claims the group is waiting for the appearance of a single opposition candidate before becoming more active. Zubr also claims to have strong ties to youth opposition groups in Serbia, Ukraine and Georgia, and many Zubr members were believed to have participated in Kiev's Orange Revolution. Whether Zubr will revive itself for the 2006 presidential elections remains to be seen. End summary.

**Classification Extended on : 09/16/2013 ~ Class: CONFIDENTIAL ~ Authority: DSCG
 11-1 ~ ☐ Declassify on: 05-26-2020**

REVIEW AUTHORITY: Robert Homme, Senior Reviewer

Zubr's Fall from Grace

2. (C) The youth resistance group Zubr was at its peak during the 2001 presidential elections, when it had up to 10,000 members [REDACTED] At that time Zubr staged numerous public protests. In addition to the distribution of fliers and providing members for street protests, Zubr excelled in street theaters mocking Lukashenko and his regime.

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3. (C) Zubr began its long fall after 2001. [REDACTED]

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4. (C) Other donors have pointed out that Zubr has a track record of using grant monies to lobby other donors. In 2001 and subsequently, Zubr produced a number of extremely high-quality (and expensive) t-shirts and fliers, invariably in English, to distribute to western donors. Zubr is continuing this activity. Kobets frequently travels to conferences in Europe, where he distributes copious numbers of English-language booklets on Zubr. Kobets claimed the booklets are too expensive to produce in Russian or to distribute in Belarus. [REDACTED]

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What is Zubr Today?

5. (C) Getting to the truth of what Zubr is today has been difficult. It remains an unregistered, and hence illegal in the eyes of the regime, organization. Lukashenko even referred to Zubr in 2004 as a terrorist organization. According to Zubr's current leadership (Vladimir Kobets,

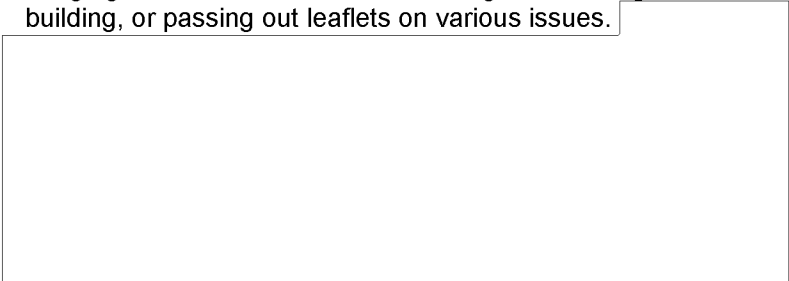
Nikita Sasim), Zubr is a collection of many autonomous youth groups with members in 70 towns. Its goals are democratization in Belarus and integration with the European Union. Its methods are the distribution of independent newspapers, leaflets, stickers, and street

protests. It is not tied to any party or political coalition, but supports all the pro-democracy forces.



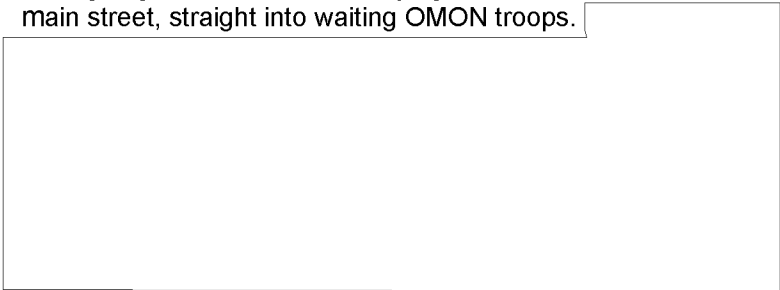
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7. (C) Over the past year Zubr activists have staged a number of small protests around the country, most involving less than five people. Typical Zubr activities consist of hanging Belarus' banned nationalist flag from a bridge or building, or passing out leaflets on various issues.



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8. (C) Although both groups deny any connection, Charter 97 is clearly Zubr's parent organization. Zubr was founded by Dmitry Bondarenko, a Charter leader, and Charter's and Zubr's leadership can usually be found in each other's company. Charter 97 claims Zubr is the opposition's "street fighters," and clearly uses them to that purpose. Zubr activists provoked police at a July 21 protest by raising flags and banners and trying to march down Minsk's main street, straight into waiting OMON troops.



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9. (C) That Zubr remains active is confirmed by the number of arrested members. The organization claims Zubr members were arrested 638 times in 2004. [Note: Post believes this to be accurate, based on press reporting. However, some Zubr members were very active; leader Nikita Sasim, for example, was arrested 29 times. Other leaders stay out of the limelight; Kobets was arrested only once in 2004.] About 80 percent of those were arrested for distributing leaflets or newspapers, and around ten percent received small fines or up to 15 days in jail. The rest were released without charge. Zubr members periodically joined larger street protests, especially on July 21, when 72 members were arrested, and in the week after the October elections, when 64 members were arrested. Many of those arrested July 21 were fined up to USD 300, while most arrested after the elections were released without charge.

What Others Say; "A Zubr is Just a Big Cow"

10. (C) [redacted] which had 3,500 non-partisan election observers in 2004, noted his group has never encountered Zubr activists in the larger regional cities. They have met a handful of Zubr activists in smaller towns, but these are usually young pro-democracy activists who belong to a number of opposition groups, rather than being dedicated Zubr members.

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11. (C) [redacted] was one of those who left because of Kobets' leadership. She believes Zubr is a

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spent force, "just a big cow!" [Note: "Zubr" is Belarusian for bison.] [redacted]

[redacted] from Gomel expressed similar views that Zubr is no longer an effective organization.

12. (C) [redacted] told Pol Chief Zubr was a strong force when it was well funded in 2001, but now it only has a few hundred activists. They have worked with other opposition groups on a few street protests, but [redacted] claimed they are too quick to run away from police to be useful.

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13. (C) [redacted] another former Zubr regional coordinator [redacted] (a member of the Free Belarus coalition, which is closely affiliated with Zubr). Borotko also went his own way as Zubr fell

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after 2001, reportedly because of differences with Kobets, but he refuses to criticize the group. [REDACTED] says Zubr is smaller now than in 2001, and that it mainly focuses on small demonstrations and passing out leaflets.

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Who Funds Zubr?

14. (C) Kobets argues, convincingly, that it is nearly impossible to find domestic sources of funding. [REDACTED]

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Zubr's International Network

15. (C) Kobets and other Zubr members maintain Zubr has extensive cooperation with other pro-democracy youth groups, such as Serbia's Otpor, Ukraine's Pora, and Georgia's Kmara. [REDACTED]

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16. (C) Comment: Zubr was clearly a force in 2001, but it is unclear what exactly the group can do today. Its actions over the past few years have been small. Kobets

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[REDACTED] It remains to be seen if
Zubr can turn itself around and regain its glory for the

2006 presidential elections. Kobets stated Zubr plans a large protest for September 16, the anniversary of two political disappearances. This will be an effective test of today's Zubr, and a strong indication of what role the organization could play in 2006.

PHLIPOT

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